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ABSTRACT

The New England Consortium criteria of excellence are 26 statements of conditions which describe a quality reading program and which must exist if all children are to learn to read. These statements are grouped under five goal areas, the fourth of which, selecting and utilizing materials, is treated in this position paper. The paper supports attainment of the following criteria for this goal area: the school media center meets the ALA-NEA standards; all textbooks and other materials are appropriate to the instructional level of the students using them; materials in both classrooms and media centers accommodate the varying learning styles of the pupil population; the materials in both classrooms and media centers are selected to accommodate the wide range of reading interests of the pupil population; and the school system maintains a library of carefully selected and frequently updated professional media. (JM)

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Selecting and Utilizing Materials

A Position Paper of

THE NEW ENGLAND CONSORTIUM
FOR THE RIGHT TO READ

September 1976

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Contract Arrangements

The Curriculum Research and Development Center, Department of Education, University of Rhode Island holds the contract for this project. Fiscal management is under the direction of Dr. Theodore M. Kellogg. Dr. Marion L. McGuire is the coordinator of operations.

Introduction

The New England Consortium Criteria of Excellence are twenty-six statements of conditions that describe a quality reading program. These conditions must exist if all children are to learn to read. The relative quality of a program may be judged by determining the degree to which the program meets these standards.

The statements are grouped under five goal areas, as shown below:

New England Consortium Criteria of Excellence
Goal Areas

A. Community and School Climate
B. Organizing and Managing a Reading Program
C. Staffing a Reading Program
*D. Selecting and Utilizing Materials
E. Fostering Reading Interests

The position taken in this paper supports attainment of the criteria in Goal Area D: Selecting and Utilizing Materials, as listed below:

1. The school media center meets the ALA-NEA standards.
2. All textbooks and other materials are appropriate to the instructional level of the students using them.
3. Materials in both classrooms and media centers accommodate the varying learning styles of the pupil population.
4. The materials in both classrooms and media centers are selected to accommodate the wide range of reading interests of the pupil population.
5. The school system maintains a library of carefully selected and frequently updated professional media.

This position paper is provided to assist school personnel in developing a rationale for and in planning programs and activities to meet these criteria.

Selecting and utilizing materials that are appropriate for instruction is becoming a continuously more complex task. This is due in part to our increasing knowledge of individual differences to which instructional adjustments should be made and in part to the multiplicity and uniqueness of many published materials and programs.

There was a time when selecting materials meant selecting a basal reader, the main differences among which were: the number of new words introduced at each reader level, the rate at which these words were introduced—or the number of new words per number of running words, the level at which particular words were introduced, story length, picture clues, and the introduction of the skills program. One had to look closely to find the differences. Now basal readers differ greatly in philosophy, methodology and the number and kind of related materials available. In addition, there is a plethora of attractive, single-concept materials that can be built in as components in an instructional system. This creates a problem. No longer are the simple criteria of number of new words, story length, attractiveness, etc., useful. Yet materials are too expensive to select on surface characteristics. There is an urgent need for a sound rationale to replace the seemingly random ordering that occurs when no established criteria are used.

The position taken in this paper is that *materials should be selected and utilized to best serve the needs of the learner based on his/her skill development, instructional level, learning style, interests and tastes.* To explain this position, the paper will briefly review the background of the materials' selection process leading up to the present status, discuss a possible way for local school districts to develop criteria and make recommendations.

Background

A generation or two ago teachers were seldom faced with the task of selecting materials for reading instruction. There was a basal series of readers, quite likely the accompanying workbook, and sometimes a supplementary phonics workbook. The basal series was often made to last for 10 years or more. It was not uncommon to find some teachers who moved into a system and out again without having had the opportunity to suggest or react to the purchase of new reading materials.

Workbooks were another matter. There was always a scramble for workbooks. What else was there for students to do while the teacher rotated the three groups? Classrooms were not cluttered with colorful supplementary materials. However, creative teachers kept the ditto machines going, and some companies produced packets of ditto masters of related skills practice which teachers referred to as "busy-

work." In spite of the many problems presented by this kind of educational diet, many students learned to read.

As the post-World War II baby boom hit the schools and class size became larger, the great discrepancies in reading achievement among students at a given grade level became more noticeable. Some school systems experimented with the idea of co-basals so that slower students would have the opportunity to read stories they had not already heard read by the faster groups. Then, too, some teachers found it helpful to have slower learners read both series at each reader level, before going on, to allow more learning time for the skills presented at that level.

Prior to the mid 1950's schools seemed to operate at a slower pace. Children for whom television was a baby-sitter were just beginning to arrive in the lower grades. Wide variations in achievement were expected and explained by the normal curve. There were very few remedial reading programs and much less concern about failure. Then on October 4, 1957, the surprise of Sputnik I ushered in many changes in American education.

The National Defense Education Act (NDEA), passed by Congress in 1958, provided assistance in strengthening instruction in science, mathematics, foreign languages and other critical subjects felt to have a bearing on national defense. It was several years before reading was designated as a critical area. Eventually, schools were allowed to purchase certain reading materials using NDEA funds. A larger impact on reading was felt after the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) which provided funds for special programs for the disadvantaged, the purchase of library books and certain textbooks, innovative projects and research. Before most school systems had been able to determine their needs or to plan special programs in accordance with funding guidelines, publishers made available all sorts of colorful books, activities and games—all "Qualifying for Purchase under NDEA or ESEA." Many of these were familiar materials in more colorful formats. At the same time, however, expensive mechanical devices appeared which may have added interest and motivation for some pupils, but fell far short of their promises. Because, at the time, the emphasis in education was on change and innovation, and many purchases were made without a feel for their use, much of the material and equipment accumulated in closets and storerooms.

Gradually, however, the quality of reading materials and the supervision of reading projects improved. Materials of better form and content appeared. Some were designed to be more relevant to the experiences and ethnic background of learners. Others stressed linguistic concepts and other newly adapted approaches to learning to read. Remedial reading programs sprang up overnight everywhere. Publishers could

sell almost anything produced since the catchword for program development was "innovative." The late 1960's was a time when educators could truly test out the dream of the lean years: "We could do a better job if we only had more materials." A study conducted in one of the New England States in 1966, just before the great influx of new materials into the schools, showed that teachers in that state felt that, in addition to the need for remedial reading teachers, the greatest need of their schools was for new materials. They listed the following types, in rank order: 1) supplementary books and materials, 2) special materials for phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, etc., 3) diverse materials to meet individual needs, and 4) machines and kits. In the few years that followed this study, most classrooms were supplied with a great variety of new materials.

About this time the now-famous *First Grade Studies* were conducted. Many approaches and combinations of materials were tried. The findings from those studies indicated that most children can learn to read regardless of the method used for instruction. The surprising finding was that there was greater variation in achievement among teachers using the same method than there was among groups of teachers using different methods. The message was clear: It is the teacher that makes the difference in the instructional program. There are obviously other critical factors in the operation of a total reading program; but, in the instructional aspect of it, the teacher—what the teacher knows, how the teacher presents information, what the teacher does to adjust to each individual student's instructional level, learning rate, learning style, interest and taste—was found to make the greatest difference in whether or not students learned. The fortunate student was the one who had a good teacher, not the one who had a roomful of "innovative and diverse" materials.

There is data at other educational levels to support this finding. In the Maine Assessment of Educational Progress in Reading of Nine-Year-Olds the existence of "few," "some," or "many" remedial reading resources did not distinguish schools with high from those with low reading achievement.

The hypotheses had been tested and the bubble had broken. Millions of dollars had been spent and great claims made . . . but now the time had come to go back to the drawing board. In drafting a new blueprint, the importance of instructional materials should not be discounted. The finding indicated that *materials alone* is not the answer. There is a teacher factor—a selection factor, a utilization factor—that cannot be discounted.

The Right to Read Effort is built on the background information that has been gathering over the years. The money, the work, the time have not been wasted. Beliefs had to be tested. The assumptions underlying the

Right to Read Effort are the result of these tests. The assumptions are basically, that:

1. All individuals, with the exception of the one percent considered uneducable, can learn to read.
2. Each individual is unique, functioning at his own rate of growth affected by experiential characteristics, and in need of individualized educational experiences and diversified approaches, methods and materials.
3. Since reading is an integral aspect of learning, it should be offered as a continuous process. This concept should be translated into classroom practice at all levels of education and should be supported through staff development programs.
4. Not only every educator but every citizen should play a contributory role in the reading process. All sectors of society should marshal resources to combat illiteracy.

The assumption underlying the Right to Read effort imply that 1) all can learn to read, 2) there are sufficient materials, methods and approaches to do the job, 3) there is sufficient knowledge to be shared in staff development sessions so that all teachers at all levels can share in the process, and 4) that it is everyone's responsibility to contribute to the development or a more literate society. Education includes literacy. Every educator must carry some of that responsibility.

What does that mean for out topic at hand? It means that since materials alone will not do the job, it is every educator's responsibility to select and utilize materials in a way that increases students' knowledge and understanding. The measure of an educational enterprise is not what teachers teach but what students learn. Experience tells us that to improve learning we must take another look at materials.

Developing Criteria for the Selection and Utilization of Materials

It has been argued that it is not the wealth of materials that supports learning but the careful selection and use of those materials. There can be a great diversity of materials available without having materials at an appropriate level, in large enough print, on a particular topic, etc. While every possible need can not be foreseen, there are ways to determine what kinds of materials are essential and how they can best be used. These two topics—selection of materials and utilization of materials—will be developed separately.

Selection of materials. Materials should be selected based on two types of criteria: program criteria and student criteria. From the point of view of program, consideration should be given to the following questions:

1. What is the philosophy of the reading program? What kinds of reading materials are suited to that philosophy? The basal program should be closely attuned to the philosophy.

2. What skills have been identified as essential skills in the K-12 sequence? Materials on hand should be coded to the essential skills to determine where there are gaps. Materials should be selected to fill the gaps so there are practice materials for all of the essential skills.

3. What methodology or mode of presentation of instruction is followed by teachers? Do the materials fit the method? For example, using one method for presentation but materials representative of another method as follow-up practice should be discouraged. It creates conflicts in learning.

4. What approach is used with the majority of students—language experience? phonic? linguistic? The bulk of the practice material should match the predominant approach. Different approaches should be provided for students with different learning styles. Students should not be moved from one approach to another within the same year or from year to year. The approach that best matches a student's learning style should be used consistently so that learning is sequenced and continuous.

There are also questions to be answered about student needs.

1. What are the special characteristics of the school population? What materials would be most appropriate to match these characteristics? If the majority of the student population is of a particular ethnic background, a large portion of the materials should show persons of that background in successful situations, if possible. It is recognized that there is difficulty in finding very specialized materials among publishers' offerings as their ability to market items at a reasonable price is dependent upon large volume sales. But, where materials are scarce, teachers can often substitute newspaper and magazine articles about successful members of the group so that no group in the school feels devoid of its representatives and heroes, if you will.

2. What are the students' instructional and independent reading levels? Are there materials available at appropriate levels? This is an especially important question in regard to content area books and materials.

Teachers need to be knowledgeable about students' reading levels to make this kind of match. Every classroom teacher should have had at least two courses in reading and primary grade teachers at least three to four courses in order to be facile in estimating students' levels and sufficiently familiar with the kinds of materials available to make quick adjustments of materials to students and to use them most advantageously. The matching of student reading levels to materials is so essential to progress that a staff development program should be

launched to build this concept if it is not already generally applied.

Students do not make progress when placed in materials that are too easy or too difficult. If a student can read every word in a book and answer 90 percent of the questions without direction from the teacher—that is, without having new vocabulary and concepts introduced and the reading guided by questioning and other motivational strategies—then the book is too easy for instruction, but just right for independent reading. On the other hand, if after the teacher properly introduces a selection a student still misses approximately one word out of every ten words or fails to understand more than half of what is read, the book is too difficult and will cause such frustration that no learning will take place.

To be appropriate for instruction, material should be at a level of difficulty where not more than one word in twenty has to be figured out and the student can answer three-quarters of the questions by reading the selection alone. In addition, a student properly placed in a selection will sound relatively fluent.

Reading skills develop in a spiral from easy to difficult. A student must be proficient at each level before going on. Leaving gaps in any area—sight vocabulary, word analysis skills, comprehension skills, fluency and phrasing, etc,—will impede progress at the next level. Leaving gaps at lower levels causes reading disability at higher levels. Students who are pushed along into materials that are too difficult never catch up. It is estimated that up to 90 percent of reading disability cases in the schools are caused by lack of mastery of each step in learning to read, usually at the very beginning but sometimes at a particular stage along the way. Inappropriate selection and utilization of materials with lack of attention to instructional level account for a large part of this problem. This is a grave issue to which every school system should give immediate attention.

3. What is the range of student learning rates? If some students require five to six times as much practice to master a fact or skill as some others, are there sufficient materials to accommodate these students?

The differences in students' learning rates account for a large portion of the difficulty teachers have adjusting instruction and the use of materials to students' reading levels. Research on mastery learning has given us insight into this problem, however, and fortified our belief that all can learn to read.

It was originally proposed by John Carroll[1] that the differences we observe in students' aptitudes do not describe the amount they can learn or the level to which they can learn. Rather, it describes the length of time it will take a student to learn a given concept or skill—the

[1] Carroll, John B. "A Model of School Learning," *Teachers College Record*, Vol. 64 (1963), 723-733.

learning rate. Verbal intelligence scores were found to be highly correlated with learning rate and some students were found to take five or six times longer to learn each concept or skill than others.

Research studies that have attempted to apply this concept to instruction have been highly successful. Students have been given sufficient instruction and practice to achieve mastery at each level before going on. It was found that almost all students could achieve mastery when given the time, help and practice. This is exciting. So often in the classroom we have "settled for less" from some students, believing they have done the best they could. Now we know that if we go back far enough to establish a firm base—and that may be naming items or speaking in sentences—and work hard enough on each step, that mastery all along the way is possible. What is more exciting is that research tells us that as time goes on, achieving mastery takes a student less and less time, student motivation increases, attitudes improve. With this potential for the future, how can we fail to pay attention to learning level and learning rate?

To achieve this, we must first have the skills sequenced and materials keyed to that sequence of skills. Then teachers must be knowledgeable about selecting and using those materials at an appropriate level to achieve mastery. It is possible, and the potential is great. But, it is not easy. It requires knowledge, supervision, consultant assistance, and a good management system. Even the independent reading that students do will affect their learning rate if the books are properly selected at the independent level. The whole reading program is so interrelated that all of the parts have to fit to work well.

4. What has been discovered about student learning modalities? Generally speaking, about two-thirds of a class will learn to read regardless of the method used. Nearly all the rest will succeed with minor adjustments in instruction and sufficient practice. The remainder would do better if the method were adjusted to their specific learning styles. Schools may differ in the percentages so an assessment should be made to determine the need for other types of materials.

While the majority of students have intact learning channels and operate with average or better ability whether information is presented through the auditory, visual, kinesthetic or tactile channel, or some combination of these, some students cannot learn as well through some channels as others. Some cannot associate information taken in through two channels at the same time. Some cannot integrate new information with previously acquired information without specific assistance.

It has been found through experience that reading instruction must be adapted for these students. It does relatively little good to work on the

basic psychological abilities alone. If this is done—and there are those who are not convinced of the necessity of this if regular instruction is adjusted to account for learning differences—instruction on reading/reading readiness, as appropriate, should be concurrent, but adjusted to take advantage of student learning strengths and interests.

The basic psychological ability approach, in isolation, is not related to progress in reading achievement, according to available research findings. Furthermore, it produces frustration. The student knows that he/she is not learning to read; almost everyone else is. Frustration impedes future learning. The student goes into a learning tailspin, as though caught in a maelstrom.

Techniques are available for teaching all students to read. Students should not have to fail first to gain their birthright: to learn to read. Consultant assistance can help teachers find an appropriate modality for a given student's learning, and appropriate materials for the conduct of instruction. A remedial/corrective reading teacher can assist in specialized instruction and locating sufficient practice materials so that special instruction and classroom instruction are in tune.

In schools where there is a learning disabilities specialist, that person should be included on the consulting team for the most seriously disabled readers (approximately 2-3 percent of the total population). In fact, all specialists whose roles place them in a position to contribute diagnostic information should work cooperatively as a team in the design of a total program, including the selection of materials, for students with such serious problems. These team members should be consulted in ordering materials to meet specialized needs.

When the early stages of instruction are appropriate, and time for the extended practice needed is given, students are found to become more and more able to learn by normal classroom techniques as they progress through the stages of the program. Materials reflect this gradual move toward a general approach. It is difficult to find materials that reflect a particular approach beyond the second or third reader level, and they are seldom needed.

5. Has an interest inventory been given? The interests of children in the primary grades have been found to be fairly predictable, but at the fourth grade level, a diversity of interests begins to appear. These interests should be considered, especially in selecting books at students' independent levels for recreatory reading or for special projects or research assignments.

Prior to the time when materials will be selected for purchase, a committee should be formed to develop specific criteria. Questions

such as the above should be answered and a determination made of the point where program criteria and student criteria intersect. For example, it may be decided that material is needed for practicing vowel sounds taught by the phonic approach at a particular level of difficulty. Purchases can then be made to fill that gap in the skills sequence. Such a purchase enables students to move smoothly through a continuous progress program. This approach is far superior to selecting materials because of their attractiveness or promise of motivational appeal.

Utilization of materials. Every lesson that is planned should have the potential for success for every student. Sometimes that is achieved through using different materials for students of differing abilities. Sometimes it is achieved through using the same materials in different ways. Certainly, most of the time, students should be able to read the materials of instruction with reasonable fluency and comprehension.

In order to match materials to student needs, it is essential to know the student's instructional level, learning style, interests, etc. as discussed in the previous section, It is also necessary to be familiar with the materials—to know their readability level and particular characteristics. Formulas are available for computing readability and publishers will usually provide information about the particular characteristics such as ethnic-related content, phonic or linguistic approach, etc. In gaining knowledge about materials, it is also recommended that they be carefully reviewed by the committee and discussed with other users, if possible. Reading the manual or guidebook is helpful in determining how the materials might best be used, too.

Materials are utilized in various ways in teaching. They may be used for initial instruction to present an overview of a topic, to develop a concept, to introduce a skill, etc. During this stage the work is teacher-directed. The materials should be easy for the teacher to employ in putting across a point. The second stage of instruction involves directed practice where students demonstrate under supervision that the concept or skill has been understood. A third step involves independent practice to ensure mastery. And, finally, a teacher makes an effort to check on the independent use of what has been learned in new contexts—to solve problems, to make judgments, to produce new syntheses of ideas. The various ways materials are utilized in teaching should be considered both at the time of initial selection for purchase and also at the moment of preparation for instruction.

Recommendations

It is recommended that a materials selection committee be formed to:

1. assess the materials on hand in terms of the philosophy and goals of

the program, the K-12 sequence of essential skills, and their readability levels.

2. assess the special needs of students in terms of instructional level, learning rate, learning style, interests and tastes
3. determine where the gaps are in the availability of materials to meet program needs and student needs
4. draw up specifications for needed materials
5. seek out, review and select new materials to fill the gaps found through program and student assessment

The influx of new knowledge of the reading process reveals the importance of materials' selection and utilization to student success. Knowing that success is possible places a great responsibility on all educators to work toward the Right to Read goal: that all may read to the limit of their capability.